

Fells Parkways Vision Plan

Charrette Process Summary



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Background

The Middlesex Fells Reservation located in Stoneham, Massachusetts, is a 2,575 acre reservation and park area under the jurisdiction and care of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). Because of its size, ecological quality, historical significance, and proximity to the heart of Boston, the Fells is a true treasure for the entire metropolitan region as well as the surrounding communities.

The Middlesex Fells, established in 1894, was one of the earliest reservations created in the Metropolitan Parks System. The development of a Middlesex Fells Parkway system was integral to making the reservation accessible for the public. Many of the roads that were developed into parkways were pre-existing, while other roads were constructed to provide a multi-modal experience and access throughout the reservation. Today the parkways retain much of their integrity and function as a system of interconnected roads traveling through the reservation as well as adjacent residential and commercial development. Recognized by the Massachusetts Historical Commission to be historically significant, the Middlesex Fells Parkways were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2002.

Through the years, as a result of growth and development of the Boston area, the Metropolitan Parkway System has become the “default” arterial roadways for commuters and travelers through the region. Construction in the 1960s of Interstate I-93 through the middle of the Fells severely altered the character of the reservation. Because of the proximity to Interstate-93 and Downtown Boston, the Fells Parkways have become attractive by-pass commuting routes. The (sometimes) aggressive nature of commuting traffic and the highway-like geometric changes that have occurred over the years combined with the parkways inherent long views and gentle curves have resulted in speeding and unsafe driving behavior. Furthermore the dominance and behavior of motorists has also impacted the safe and comfortable enjoyment of the parkways and the Fells by pedestrians, cyclists and other reservation users. The parkway’s historic design intent of providing a leisurely driving experience and making recreational features accessible has been greatly compromised.

Recognizing the status quo on the Middlesex Fells Parkways to be unacceptable, DCR initiated a planning process to develop a vision for how the parkways should look, feel and function. The resulting Fells Parkway Vision Plan provides guidance for future policy and capital investment decisions to reclaim the parkway as a “park with a road in it”. The vision plan focuses on Woodland Road, the central spine of the Fells Reservation. The plan illustrates a concept that reinforces the original design intent of Woodland Road as an internal park road and provides increased park accommodation to pedestrians, cyclists, and motorists while enhancing the natural and recreational

landscape of the Fells.

The vision plan also provides a framework for the DCR's policy decisions regarding proposed development applications along or near the Fells Parkways, including the Home Depot at the northern end of the reservation and the redevelopment of the former Boston Regional Medical Center into the proposed Langwood Commons project.

This short document, together with the Fells Parkways Vision Plan, summarizes the vision planning process, as facilitated by Glatting Jackson, with the support of Rizzo Associates.

Public Process

The Fells Parkways visioning process was designed as a highly collaborative and interactive endeavor. The two key elements of the participative planning process were: (1) the stakeholder interview sessions and (2) the charrette process.

Stakeholder Interviews

The project team conducted a series of one-on-one stakeholder interviews to gather data and input from several stakeholders that represent local as well region-wide interests. From November 28 to 30, 2006, stakeholders, including the Friends of the Middlesex Fells, state senators and representatives, municipal leaders, non-profit interest groups, the DCR staff, local residents, and developers were interviewed. Specifically, these included:

- Communities for Fells Preservation
- DCR Staff
- Friends of the Middlesex Fells
- Gutierrez Company
- Livable Street Alliance
- Mass Bike Coalition
- Massachusetts Historical Commission
- Stoneham Board of Selectmen & Planning Board
- Walk Boston
- Alderman Frank Wright (Melrose Ward 3)
- Mayor Robert Dolan
- Mayor Michael McGlynn
- Rep. Paul Casey
- Rep. Paul Donato
- Rep. Michael Festa
- Sen. Patricia Jehlen
- Rep. Carl Scortino
- Sen. Richard Tsei
- Dr. Peter Paicos, Dr. Jerry Rittenhouse, Dr. Rob Alexander & Dr. Michael Krupa

The following were the major issues, opportunities, and initial recommendations voiced during the stakeholder interviews:

Regarding the Fells

- Spot Pond and the Fells are special places with important ecological features

- Unique green space within close proximity to Downtown
- Irreplaceable asset and irreparable if damaged
- Underutilized (as a recreational asset) because of difficulty in accessing it (walking, cycling and even driving)
- Need community and regional partnership to take care of shared assets

Regarding the Function and Character of the Parkway

- Fells Parkways offer some of the few “direct” north-south routes to/from Boston and are used as “default” arterial roadways
- Parkway function is degraded
- “A parkway is not a road, it is park with a road in it.”
- Do not widen the parkway or put signals on the parkway
- The Fells Parkways is historic and is integral part of a the region’s historic parkway systems
- Need to preserve the “historic intent” and historic defining characteristics of the parkways
- Need to reinforce the concept of parkways as recreation routes
- Need to emphasize the multi-use function of parkways and accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists
- Future vision of the Fells Parkways can become a model for other parkways within the region
- “We can have a little congestion in exchange for preservation of the parkway.”

Regarding Parkway Driving Behavior and Traffic

- Unsafe driving behavior and speeding
- Parkways are not designed to Interstate standards but are used as Interstates
- Pedestrians can’t walk safely along and across the parkways
- Certain intersections are particularly dangerous
- Rotaries are not easy to navigate, not legible
- Cut-through traffic on neighborhood roads
- Choke points at both ends of Woodland Road causes traffic back-ups
- Regional traffic is channeled onto parkways
- “Tidal wave” of growth in suburban patterns brings even more traffic pressure
- Woodland road is used as an alternate to I-93 when I-93 is congested

Concerns about Lack of Facilities

- Few sidewalks, no adequate cross walks to get to/from major pedestrian attractions – Spot Pond, swimming pool, Flynn Ice Rink, Stoneham Zoo, Botume House
- No adequate bicycling facilities
- Parkways could serve bicycle-commuting route if better facilities were available
- Inadequate parking especially around activity areas

- Lack of other recreational amenities (marked trails, picnic areas, and other family-oriented activities)
- Lack of signage or gateway features to identify park

Other Issues

- Flooding in some areas
- Location of a new Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA) reservoir
- Need adequate maintenance and patrolling of the DCR facilities
- Off-road trail security concerns
- Hospital redevelopment may over-burden driveways, cause other changes to the parkway, and be incompatible with the area
- Redevelopment should not have a larger footprint than what currently exists
- Fear that additional changes will be required once redevelopment is in place
- The hospital is in a previously disturbed site
- Understand that there are private property rights for the hospital site but redevelopment should be balanced with constraints of infrastructure and be consistent with the character of the parkway
- Redevelopment can offer much needed affordable in-town housing
- Redevelopment might trigger need to expand police, fire, and other support services

Charrette Week

With community input from stakeholder interviews and a preliminary understanding of the study areas' physical context, issues, and opportunities; Glatting Jackson conducted a four-day charrette to develop the Parkway Vision Plan. A charrette is a common method of participatory planning employed by architects and town planners. This planning process was highly suitable for the Fells Parkway vision planning effort. The charrette was conducted from December 11 to December 14, 2006. It offered an opportunity for intense collaboration between the study team, various public officials, and the public. Through the course of a compressed time-frame, issues and opportunities were confirmed, alternatives were proposed and tested, and solutions were debated and agreed upon.

Charrettes have many benefits. First, those influential to the project develop a vested interest in the plan and take ownership in its vision. A multi-disciplinary team works together to produce a thorough plan that addresses the key aspects of its design and implementation. The collective effort organizes the input of all the participants during focused meetings thereby eliminating the need for prolonged discussions that typically delay conventional planning projects. Finally, a better product is produced more efficiently and more cost effectively due to its collaborative nature.

The charrette opened and ended with public meetings on the evening of December 11 and December 14. Both meetings were held at the Stoneham High School.

Day 1 (December 11)

Team members conducted field work, photographed the parkways and the trails, and talked to park users and residents. During the evening of Day 1, Glatting Jackson facilitated a public kick-off meeting. Ian Lockwood of Glatting Jackson presented the results of the stakeholder interviews and some lessons learned from case studies of parkways facing similar issues. Ian's presentation also included an overview of "traffic calming", specifically focusing on tools that may be considered for reconfiguring the parkways so their designs may self-regulate traffic speeds and driver behavior and better reflect the original intent of the parkways.

The community confirmed the concerns heard during the stakeholder interviews and voiced additional comments about the parkways. A number of the public comments focused around understanding how the study team will consider the proposed Langwood Commons project in the Vision Plan and how the DCR is guiding the planning process. Glatting Jackson responded and explained the charrette mechanics and details of the study's funding. The following are the issues heard and questions voiced during the December 11th Public Meeting. (Issues common to those heard during the stakeholder interviews were not repeated here.):

- Signage along the parkways are not "readable" or well-maintained
- Do not transfer issues (i.e. traffic) to another community
- Who will pay for the plan's implementation?
- Suggest that a development moratorium be placed until the parkway plan is finalized
- How can the needs of minority populations be considered in the plan?
- Push the boundaries and provide for more recreation, narrow lanes, less speed, and more accommodation of pedestrians
- What happened to Mass Highway's two-lane plan for South Main Street?
- What is the "future traffic" time frame? 50 years? It should be for "all foreseeable time."
- Need to recommend improving transit infrastructure, encouraging transit use, cycling, commuting, etc?
- Recommend night-friendly lighting fixtures.

Day 2 & 3 (December 12 & 13)

The public was invited to participate in the charrette throughout the week while the study team worked at the Botume House in the Middlesex Fells Reservation to develop and test design and planning ideas. Over 75 residents and stakeholders came to share more input with the team during the second and third days of the charrette. These two days of the charrette offered an opportunity for the Glatting Jackson and Rizzo team to brainstorm strategies while availing of critical local community knowledge to validate preliminary

ideas. The charrette also created an opportunity for immediate and dynamic feedback on conceptual solutions, ensuring that the plan be truly responsive to the community's needs. Preliminary plans and intersection concepts were tested using intersection capacity analysis and refined to incorporate the feedback from charrette participants throughout the week. The charrette products include:

- Vision Plan for Woodland Road/South Street between North Border Road and Molyneaux Circle
- Intersection concepts for North Border/Main St., Highland/Fellsway East, and Elm Street/Route 28
- Traffic calming plan for residential neighborhood along Fellsway East (in Melrose and Stoneham)
- Proposed cross section for Elm Street
- Proposed cross section for Woodland Road
- Sketch showing potential trail crossing
- Sketch showing proposed Molyneaux Roundabout
- Sketch showing proposed cycling and walking trails

Day 4 (December 14)

The Glatting Jackson team further refined the concepts being considered for the parkway and consolidated these into a Fells Parkway Vision Plan. During the evening of Day 4, the study team facilitated a public meeting to relate the outcome of the charrette and to receive comments from the community.

The overall feedback from the community was very positive with respect to the proposed new cross-section of Woodland Road and vision for the area as a whole. The new cross-section provides two motor vehicle lanes (two-way) and two bicycle-friendly shoulders, utilizing the existing northbound side of the parkway. The existing median and southbound side of the parkway is recommended to be converted to a dedicated cycle trail, a walking trail, and additional park space. The Botume House and landscape is proposed to be developed as a recreational hub for the reservation. In general, concepts for traffic calming and intersection treatments along Woodland Road and other parkways were also received well. Glatting Jackson also presented a concept master plan for traffic calming for the neighborhood on the east side of the Fells in Melrose and Stoneham.

The following are the key comments and questions received during the last day of the charrette:

- The vision plan is a really great step toward preserving the parkway's character and intent
- Where will dollars for implementation come from?
- The impact of the hospital redevelopment should be considered
- Will traffic be redirected to residential streets?

- How can a community-wide strategy be developed to protect the Fells as a resource?
- A smart growth strategy for the region is needed.
- One major issue is that there are multiple municipalities and therefore multiple opinions.
- Don't want the parkway to become a private road for Langwood Commons
- The area needs some amount of development for public transportation to work.
- How will the entire plan gets implemented?
- How will the parkway plan be used as a model for development application?
- There is a need to consider the larger context (i.e. include Winchester and beyond).
- Increased maintenance costs with some recommended details

The ideas presented during the charrette are considered “*starter*” ideas that will have to be further refined and tested. However, the Vision Plan offers a great common vision which the DCR, the Fells communities, and other state and regional partners can use as a framework for their capital planning, policy decisions, and park planning.

One issue that surfaced in many forms and on many occasions during this process is the lack of regional planning and cooperation for dealing with land use and transportation issues, decisions, and impacts. The Fells and the parkway systems are shared regional assets worthy of preservation and enhancement and not further degradation by sprawl and exacerbated automobile dependence. The Parkway Vision Plan, although initiated by the DCR, would benefit by the resources, partnership, cooperation, and support of the entire Fells community to be fully implemented. The success of the Vision Plan and similar efforts in the Boston area in the future will benefit by close coordination and continued communication among the Fells municipalities, other Commonwealth departments (Massachusetts Historical Commission, Massachusetts Environmental Protection Agency, Massachusetts Highways Department, etc.), special interest groups, and the neighborhoods.

DCR values the contributions by all who participated in this process.